

The Incoherencies of Empire: The “Imperial” Image of the Indian at the Omaha World’s Fairs of 1898-99

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The Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1898, celebrated U.S. victory in the Spanish-American War with a weeklong Peace Jubilee. Attending was General Nelson A. Miles, Commander of the war’s Puerto Rican campaigns and also an accomplished “Indian fighter.” His record included subduing Sitting Bull in 1876, defeating Crazy Horse at the Battle of Wolf Mountains in 1877, and capturing Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé that same year. In 1886 at Skeleton Canyon, Miles captured Chiricahua Apache leader, Geronimo. Held prisoner at Fort Sill in 1898, Geronimo agreed to participate in the “Indian Congress” at the Omaha fair (See Figure 1), and his reunion with Miles in front of the crowd at the fair’s sham Indian battle became one of its most publicized moments. Newspapers nation-wide circulated the *Omaha Bee*’s account:

At yesterday afternoon’s battle General Miles and the members of his staff occupied front seats in the reserved section. . . . Geronimo looked up into the thousands of faces, apparently trying to locate a familiar one. . . . Suddenly he turned his eyes toward the place where General Miles was sitting. . . . He brushed aside the crowd with his hands and was soon at the side of General Miles. Mustering the best English at his command, he extended his hand and exclaimed: “Now general, I am glad

to see you.” The general reached for the extended hand, but suddenly it was withdrawn and instantly Geronimo clasped the white warrior in his embrace and hugged him as affectionately as would a father who had not seen his son for years.¹

Press and official fair texts framed this encounter as evidence of reconciliation, with a notorious warrior gesturing his consent to his fate in an act of paternalistic deference. Struck by the scene, one fair visitor claimed that “a new realization of what ‘peace’ means to this country was attained by those who saw the meeting of the once fanatical foe to civilization and the commanding general of a victorious army.”²

The making of this imperial spectacle suggests an important correlation between representations of Indians and the imperial debates of the Spanish-American War. The alleged closure of the frontier and the defeat of the Lakota at Wounded Knee in 1890, largely conceived of as the last of the significant Indian wars, renewed authority in the romanticized image of the “noble” Indian destined to “vanish,” literally or culturally. At the same time, political, diplomatic, and economic policy-making was increasingly directed outside American borders, culminating in the decisions to intervene in Cuba’s struggle for independence from Spain in 1898, annex Hawai‘i, and acquire Spain’s remaining colonies: Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines. The world’s fair became an important site for this imperial vision to take shape in the American cultural imagination and reach a broad audience.

The two most prominent late-nineteenth-century American fairs, the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 and Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, showcased visions of architectural grandeur, technology, and the arts to millions of fairgoers. These expositions fed the rise of mass tourism and consumerism, enticing visitors with exotic amusements including glimpses of “strange” peoples. The emergence of the idea of ethnographic villages at world’s fairs began at the Paris Exposition of 1889 and later expanded in Chicago. The importance of these displays in the evolution of European and American exposi-

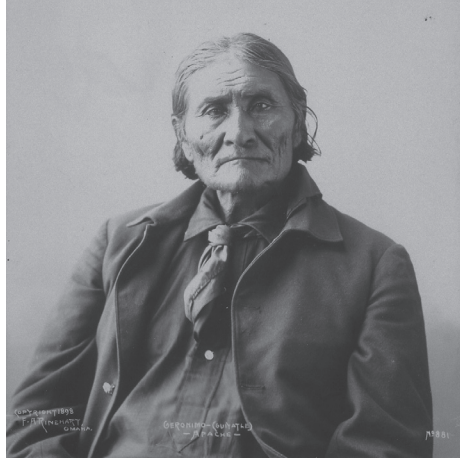


Figure 1: Portrait of Geronimo at the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1898. Copyrighted by official fair photographer, Frank A. Rinehart, but likely taken by his assistant, Adolph Muhr. (*From the collections of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, [LC-USZC2-6298]*).

tions points to a wider colonial project that positioned the United States beside the imperial regimes of Great Britain and France and in opposition to native societies.

Historians of the Omaha Exposition have argued that fair organizers shaped the “Indian Congress” in the context of the imperial debates arising from the war with Spain; writes Robert Rydell, “The directors of the Omaha fair helped to ensure that the national debate over annexation would take place in racial terms with national policy towards the Indians as the immediate frame of reference.”³ This paper, however, calls into question the assumption of the fair as a closed ideological system. Visual and textual representations of non-white peoples on the fairgrounds may have functioned to galvanize support for national and imperial policies, but this was not necessarily articulated coherently to spectators.⁴ In order to justify the extension of American political, military, and economic dominion over foreign lands and peoples, imperialists often predicated their arguments on the alleged racial inferiority and primitivism of non-white subjects. The objections of the anti-imperialists, however, who argued against incorporation based on the same perceived racial lens (along with other reasons), indicate that this racial paradigm is not *definitively* imperialistic. While the prevailing interpretation is that the world’s fairs of this period disseminated imperial images, we need to interrogate not just if these images justified imperial hierarchies, but also if they supported the “civilizing mission” intrinsic to the “white man’s burden.”

I analyze the organizational visions, publicity, exhibits, and reception of the “Indian Congress” at the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha, 1898 and the exhibition of America’s newly acquired colonies at the Greater American Exposition, which opened on the same grounds the next season. Fair exhibits offered spectators multiple, and at times contradictory, cultural messages due to the competing agendas of planners, the ability of participants to shape their own representations, and the variability of reception. To be sure, fair organizers utilized architectural schemes and other modes of display to present visible and even scientific proof of western dominance and racial hierarchies, inside and outside American borders. But, the improvisational performances of “living” exhibits, the unpredictability of crowds, and the contingency of foreign events prevented organizers from maintaining tight control over cultural content. A case in point was the unforeseen confrontation between U.S. troops and the Chippewa Indians of Minnesota occurring just a short distance from Omaha in the same week as Geronimo and Miles’ reunion. The grievances of the Chippewa typified the frustrations of many tribes of the region. The expansionist logging industry was quickly displacing their reservation and the backwater from the new dams on the Mississippi wreaked havoc on their crops and burial lands. These tensions erupted when a Chippewa leader refused to travel to serve as a witness in a liquor-selling case. As authorities pursued him, his followers reportedly killed at least four American soldiers before they were subdued.⁵ This incident prompted media critics of empire to question the enduring instabilities of Native American/U.S. relations. For example, C. G. Bush, of the anti-imperialist *New*

York World, responded with a cartoon highlighting the risk of taking on more “savages” after America’s failure to domesticate the Indians (See Figure 2). Uncle Sam observes a bloodthirsty Indian, with a gun and bloody ax, stepping over his last victim, an American soldier. “Speaking of annexing nine million more savages——.”

As some anti-imperialists pointed to the persistence of unrest to deter colonial acquisition, promoters of U.S. imperial policies exploited Geronimo’s symbolic capital to defuse this critique. Nationwide press printed Geronimo’s remarks to reporters at the Omaha fair in response to events in Minnesota:

Years ago . . . I thought that I could whip the whole United States, but since I have been around the country I have changed my mind. . . . There is no country that can whip the United States and what is the use of a few hundred Indians starting in to undertake the job. Since coming to Omaha I have learned that the white men are more numerous than the leaves on the trees.



UNCLE SAM: “Speaking of annexing nine million more savages——”

Figure 2: C. G. Bush’s anti-imperialist cartoon in reaction to the outbreak of violence in Minnesota. (*New York World*, October 8, 1898, 6).

... My days of fighting are over, except to fight for the stars and stripes, which I would be glad to do if I had the chance.⁶

Geronimo claims that what he saw in Omaha impressed upon him the inevitability of American power. His words seemingly encapsulate the imperial project of world's fairs – to demonstrate the magnitude of American civilization before an international community. Geronimo's true intentions, however, may not have been readily discernible to contemporary or historical observers. Jimmie Stevens, who accompanied the Chiricahua Apaches from the San Carlos reservation to Omaha, attested that Geronimo bitterly accused Miles at the fair of giving false assurances to induce surrender during his capture in 1886 and futilely pleaded to return to his home in Arizona.⁷ Geronimo may have hoped that a public display of deference would bring about his release. Or, perhaps, he was economically driven. Capitalizing on his own celebrity, Geronimo began demanding pay for participation, receiving \$45 per month at the Buffalo Exposition of 1901 and \$100 monthly in St. Louis in 1904.⁸

Native Americans participated in the theatrics of fair representations for many reasons, and there were financial and other incentives to perform the "Indian" that audiences wanted to see. Although Commissioner of Indian Affairs William A. Jones refused to outlay wages, he covered transportation and living costs and assured participants that they would be "well cared for."⁹ Still, given the poverty-stricken state of reservations, many participants took advantage of the fair to raise money through selling hand-made crafts and wares. Nancy Parezo and Don Fowler, in their study of the St. Louis world's fair, demonstrate that some participants consciously contributed to perpetuating popular images as a marketing ploy. While some Indians refused to attend out of concern for how the fair would depict them, many others may not have considered or deemed significant enough the impact of these representations on wider cultural conceptions of Native Americans or non-white subject peoples overseas. When accounting for the multiple perspectives of planners, participants, and spectators, a more complex picture is drawn in understanding the spectacle of the "conquered."¹⁰ It is the overlap and collision of these interests that complicated and undermined the portrait of empire that emerged on the fairgrounds in the very moment the nation debated acquiring its first overseas colonies.

Planning the "Indian Congress": Tensions between Anthropology and Spectacle

Out of efforts to boost the growth of Omaha after the Panic of 1893, the idea emerged to hold the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition and build a smaller version of Chicago's White City. Under the presidential leadership of Gurdon Wattles, vice president of the Union National Bank, fair directors acquired a congressional appropriation of \$200,000 and secured the assistance of the Bureau of American Ethnology and the departments of state, war and navy

in organizing exhibits. It opened its gates on June 1, 1898, shortly after the war began.

Its leading attraction was the "Indian Congress," featuring 545 Indians from 36 tribes from the region, the largest delegations of which were Sioux, Assinaboine, Sac & Fox, Apache, Crow, Flathead, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Arapahoe, and Omaha. Although originally conceived years earlier, the Indian Congress provided a striking opportunity for fair organizers, agents, and promoters to advertise the domestic precedents for acquiring and assimilating subject peoples to a wide audience. The timing of events, in fact, facilitated such a possibility. The Spanish-American War delayed the house and senate from passing appropriation measures for the Indian Congress until July 1, 1898, forcing it to open two months late. Its immediate planning coincided with emerging public debate regarding the fate of Spanish imperial holdings following the cessation of hostilities. Prior to the November peace talks, President William McKinley had yet to publicize his decision to acquire all of the Philippines. The Omaha fair, closing shortly before McKinley announced his designs, took place at a critical time when the nation grappled with an undefined and divisive imperial agenda.

Historian Walter L. Williams argues for a direct connection between the pacification of America's native populations and the forging of an overseas empire. His thesis situates U.S. Indian policy in this period "as a precedent for imperialist domination over the Philippines and other islands," and urges historians to "accept at face value the argument of the imperialists themselves that they were not making a new departure by holding colonial subjects."¹¹ The *New York Herald* was one of many voicing the comparison: "It is to be hoped that the lessons which we have learned in dealing with the North American Indians may bear their full fruit in deciding as to what is best for our oceanic possessions."¹² Frequent references to continental expansion in the imperial debates suggests not only that the timing facilitated such connections, but also that discursive precedents were already in place to support it.

Nonetheless, with its blend of circus-like spectacle and pseudo-scientific vision, the Indian Congress produced inconsistent, and ultimately indefinite, imperial messages. Displaying Native Americans reinforced colonial categories designating them as other and celebrated the completed conquest.¹³ The emphasis on the Indians as a "vanishing" race, however, undermined comparison to the thriving populations of America's new colonies. Presenting Indian life prior to conquest erased the subsequent history of pacification that made the Indian case a viable analogy to the political and military demands of managing highly populated colonial societies. This enabled fair planners to dodge the controversies surrounding late-nineteenth-century Indian policy, but they also elided mention of actual efforts to uplift the "noble savage" through education, religion, or cultural practices. In this way, the fairs' commitment to the romanticized portrait of bygone Indian life trumped the depiction of a different imperial narrative, the justification of the "white man's burden." Idealizing native subjects prior to incorporation obscured the need for uplift and subordinated evidence of the

impact of successfully carrying out a civilizing mission. Stereotypical images of Indian violence and primitivism thus worked in a number of different contexts and could promote multiple, even antithetical, ideological agendas.

From its inception, fair publicity marketed the Indian Congress as an exhibit for serious study of the tribes of the Trans-Mississippi region. "No such opportunity of studying the red man just as he is has ever before been offered. Nor will it, in all likelihood, ever occur again," claimed the *Nebraska State Journal*.¹⁴ Decades of population growth had devastating consequences for the tribes of the region. By 1880, the government had removed most of the Pawnee, Ponca, and Otoe-Missouri to Indian Territory. The Omaha Indians were the most successful in withstanding removal by submitting to government stipulations that split reservations into family allotments (under the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887). Although the policies intended to facilitate citizenship through land ownership, productive land use, and education, the results were regrettable; the Omaha suffered from internal division, hardship, and the imposition of settlers eager to acquire their former lands.¹⁵

The urgency to hold the Congress, as the "last" opportunity to gather these tribes, may have been in part a reaction to these processes of removal and detribalization. Anthropologists, like John Wesley Powell and Spencer F. Baird, repeatedly invoked the vanishing Indian argument in seeking congressional funding for exhibitions, like the Omaha Indian Congress. Native languages, rituals, and artifacts, they argued, would soon be unavailable for study.¹⁶ The ethnological language of fair advertising stemmed in part from Edward Rosewater, the editor of the *Omaha Bee*, head of the Department of Publicity and Promotion for the Omaha fairs, and originator of the idea of the Indian Congress. Rosewater turned for assistance to Powell, the director of the Bureau of Ethnology (BAE), who granted ethnologist James Mooney of the Smithsonian a leave of absence to complete the assignment. Employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs for the interim, Mooney oversaw the organization of the Indian exhibits in Omaha. He procured the help of Assistant Secretary of War George de Rue Meiklejohn to recruit army officers to act as Indian agents to assemble representatives from regional tribes, and he organized them on the fairgrounds by housing type in order to imprint on audiences the variety of native cultures.¹⁷

By re-inventing the Indian prior to Western influence, fair organizers fostered a nostalgic world of pre-imperial culture. An article in the *Scientific American* explained, "some of them have become so civilized, like the Creeks, Choctaws, Cherokees, and Seminoles [of the "five civilized tribes"] that their presence would add little interest from an ethnological point of view."¹⁸ To gather participants, the Bureau of Indian Affairs sent a letter of instruction to regional agents to recruit the most "thoroughly aboriginal" of Indians, stating that "the primitive traits and characteristics of the several tribes . . . should be constantly kept in view in the selection of the Indians."¹⁹ William Cox, Secretary of the Government Exhibit Board at Omaha, noted, "the people at large held little interest in the educated

Indian of the time. They wanted to see him in his wild state, in his blanket and aboriginal tepee.”²⁰

Fair planners framed the Indian Congress as the last chance to see these “noble savages” before they died out. The U.S. Government commissioned official photographer of the Omaha fairs, Frank Rinehart, to create a photographic archive of the Indians for anthropological preservation. In an introduction to his published portraits, Rinehart justified his charge by suggesting an alternative fate for the Indian: “In a remarkably short time, education and civilization will stamp out the feathers, beads and paint . . . and the Indian of the past will live but in memory and pictures.”²¹ Rosewater reiterated Rinehart’s assimilationist notion of the “vanishing” Indian when he promoted the Congress as “the last opportunity of seeing the American Indian as a savage, for the government work now in progress will lift the savage Indian into American citizenship before this generation passes into history.”²²

By positing assimilation as a mode of “vanishing,” Rinehart and Rosewater opened the possibility for a different reading of the Congress, as confirmation of the successful acculturation of natives into civilized society. The *Bee* further recognized the potential of the Indian exhibits to support U.S. imperial policies: “To see these ever formidable and hereditary enemies of the white man encamped together . . . will impress upon the growing sons and daughters a lesson which will bear fruit in years hence when the yet unsettled and uncultivated possessions of the United States shall have become jewels upon the Star Spangled Banner.”²³ By modeling the exhibition in the form of a “Congress” and calling participants “delegates,” fair planners gave the gathering a modern, democratic, and westernized cast.

Still, this assimilationist vision diverged from the dominant ethnographic mode of representing Indians at world’s fairs that emphasized pre-civilized native life.²⁴ With the popularity of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century, the social evolutionary framework of anthropology guided depictions of native peoples in museums and fairs and became the “before” picture for the technological progress of western civilization. This formed the basis of Frank Boas and Frederic Ward Putnam’s work at the Chicago Fair of 1893. Even then, Emma Sickels, chairman of the Indian Committee of the Universal Peace Union, protested the decision not to showcase “evolved” Indians in the exhibit.²⁵ Sickels worked under Putnam, the director and curator of the Peabody Museum at Harvard, in the construction of Chicago’s anthropological exhibit. After becoming disillusioned, she publicly called the exhibit “one of the darkest conspiracies ever connived against the Indian race,” and Putnam fired her.²⁶ As in 1893, the Indian Congress of 1898 shared the goal of ethnographic purity and did not allow representation of semi-civilized or civilized Indians, even though there were many “half breeds,” as supervisor of the 1898 Indian Congress William Mercer called them, eager to participate. Mercer lamented that the “oldest and best types of Indians” were the most difficult to recruit because they were “distrustful” of the intentions of the Congress.²⁷

Mercer's vision of the Indian Congress differed from that of Rosewater and Mooney. He sought to attract interest by converting the colonized condition into sensational theatrical performances, such as mock battles. The white fraternal organization, the Improved Order of Red Men, initially proposed the idea of a sham battle, but backed out at the last moment because many of their members did not arrive in time. Having already advertised the battle, Mercer borrowed guns from local cadets and contracted the Indians of the Wild West Show to participate. The fight took place between the cowboys and "friendly" Indians of the Wild West Show and the "hostile" Indians of the Congress. The substitution of "cowboys" for "soldiers" as Indian fighters exemplified Mercer's distortion of representation to conform to mythic constructions of the west familiar to audiences through wild west shows, dime novels, and lithography.

The mock battles, scheduled daily, brought to the surface growing tensions between ethnographic and spectacular forms. Publicity in the local press wavered between emphases on its "realism," its value "to the student of Indian character," and its salacious guarantee "to freeze the blood in the veins of the timid."²⁸ Mercer, in fact, choreographed the battle to conform to imagined conceptions of savage practices, which press coverage echoed. "That the scalping act may be made more realistic," wrote the *Omaha Bee*, "it has been practiced until the Indians have it down just about as fine as they did some forty or fifty years ago."²⁹ In Figure 3, Rinehart presents a photograph of the battleground, with the gun-toting Indians adorned in war paint, feather bonnets, and buckskin over an expansive and smoky space reminiscent of the open frontier. The impression on visitors was vivid; according to the *Chicago Times-Herald*, "It was the sight of a lifetime to all of them and a nearer approach to real Indian warfare than any of them had ever imagined from reading 5-cent novels."³⁰

The marketing of these scripted re-enactments as "authentic" depictions reminded audiences of the potential for bloody confrontation in pacifying "savages" in the quest for American manifest destiny at the same time that it presented that work as a thrilling performance. Event publicity made no connection between Indian-fighting and imperial warfare. Still, these battles glorified America's violent conquest of its native population and made clear that the cowboys, the arbiters of American masculinity, would ultimately prevail with ease. Even without conscious realization, these performances socialized Americans to the politics of militarism and imperial warfare, shaping expectations of the nature of fighting "primitive" subjects, such as Filipinos with the outbreak of hostilities in February 1899, without having to reference overseas policy directly.

Complementing the sham battles were other seemingly "savage" spectacles including native war dances and dog feasts. In the evening hours, Indian participants sat around a great ring on the grass, smoking in silence. Dressed in paint and "with all the fantastic regalia that the most imaginative novelist ever conceived," claimed the *World-Herald*, dancers celebrated victory over an enemy in an exotic spectacle of war chants and rhythmic motion.³¹ Another popular attraction was the dog feast. The Sioux and Cheyenne believed dog to be a delicacy, only allowing



Figure 3: Indian Sham Battle at the Omaha Exposition. Published in *Photogravures of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, Held at Omaha, Nebraska June 1st to November 1st, 1898*. (F. A. Rinehart, 1898).

distinguished warriors to partake. The *Omaha Bee* reported, “After the dog had been killed... half a hundred young Indians who had never tasted dog, sat around and begged for even a drop of blood.”³² The dog feasts, battles, and war dances, some argued, transformed the Indian Congress into a wild west show, so much so that the Wild West Show concession at the exposition sued fair management for allowing the Indian Congress to steal its act.

A feud also arose among Rosewater, Mooney, and Mercer over the design of the Indian Congress. After Rosewater and Mooney expressed frustration with Mercer’s disregard for ethnographic accuracy, Mercer filed an injunction suit against Rosewater. Rosewater retaliated by declining to advertise Mercer’s events, and Mercer, in turn, refused to support the transport of Mooney’s own anthropological contribution, the Kiowa camp circle, to the fairgrounds. “It has degenerated into a wild west show with the sole purpose of increasing gate receipts,” Mooney complained to William McGee at the BAE. He expressed his regret to McGee that there wasn’t a greater attempt to display native industries, including corn grinding, buckskin painting, weaving, and silver work.³³ Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Jones shared Mooney’s disappointment and refused to grant any more contracts for Indians to perform in shows after Omaha under the sanction of the Indian bureau.³⁴

An important counter-site on the fairgrounds was an anthropological exhibit located in the Government Building on the Grand Court, set completely apart from the Indian encampment and managed by Harvard anthropologist Alice Fletcher. Fletcher's fieldwork with many tribes of the region gave her a national reputation. She successfully lobbied congress to prevent removal of the Omaha Indians, as she believed "the future prosperity of the people lay with the white race and not apart from it."³⁵ In her exhibit, she celebrated native industry through collections of children's handiwork and presented the Indians' successful assimilation through education.³⁶ Fletcher's exhibit, though marginalized, was one of the only spaces on the fairgrounds to portray government efforts to educate Indians.

Fletcher, however, was disappointed by the impact of her exhibit. Its meaning, which she argued presented the "vital force in aboriginal society," was reconstructed in relation to displays of American technology in the Government Building.³⁷ At the same time, the BAE placed William Henry Holmes' exhibit from the Smithsonian of life-sized Indian figures alongside her education exhibit, which further impacted its reception.³⁸ With figures in native garb of a Powhatan making stone implements, a Southern Indian woman pounding corn, a Sioux woman using a scraping tool, and a Navajo woman making silver ornaments, the exhibit gave "a vivid impression of primitive processes as contrasted with the methods and machinery of advanced civilization," claimed the *Official Catalogue of the Exposition*.³⁹ Despite Fletcher's intentions, guidebooks directed spectators to see these displays as evidence of primitivism, not as a testament to native accomplishments.

Fletcher was not alone in her frustration. Prior to its opening, fair advocates argued that the Indian Congress would have a "civilizing" effect on the participants. Designers of the St. Louis fair in 1904 would later make the same argument for bringing Filipinos to the U.S. for purposes of display.⁴⁰ But, the emphasis on spectacle, some critics concluded, demonstrated that Americans were not interested in the Indians' capacity or aspiration to adapt to American ways of life. "Precisely what the Government tells the Indian, through agent and teacher, not to do on the reservation, these things it virtually tells him to do when it permits the showman to drum up recruits for his money-making business," wrote *City and State*.⁴¹ Richard Henry Pratt, of the Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, voiced his criticism when he discovered a book of Rinehart's photographs picturing nine Carlisle graduates in war paint. "The effect, if not the intention of this," wrote Pratt, "was to bring discredit upon the educated Indian and degrade and deceive the public mind in regard to Indians generally."⁴² Despite Rosewater, Fletcher, and Mooney's attempt to present native diversity, the *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* reported, "the real differences and characteristics of the Indians were of slight interest to the average visitor."⁴³

Visual and Performative Incongruities: Experiencing the Indian Encampment

From the macro-level, the juxtaposition of the Indian encampment from the White City on the fairgrounds cast it as a peripheral zone of primitivism in contrast to the centrality of modern architectural achievement. The Indian encampment was located on the opposite side of the fairgrounds of the Grand Court, featuring the palatial mini White City of buildings that housed exhibits of fine arts, manufacturing, and agriculture, and the Bluff tract where visitors could see the participating state building exhibits. In fact, a visitor had to walk through the Midway to get from the Grand Court to the Indian encampment. In this way, visitors literally experienced the imperial relation of power as they moved through space at the fair, following the flow of traffic from the White City to the outlying Indian encampment.⁴⁴ Complicating this binary separation, however, was a growing nostalgia for native life as a remedy for late-nineteenth-century social ills. The social evolutionary frame of nineteenth-century anthropological thought positioned primitive and civilized cultures not as distinct spheres, but as a continuum of stages from savagery to civilization. The *Omaha Bee* exemplifies this holistic reading of the fair's spatial arrangement. "Encamped *together* in a frame of architectural splendor," claimed the *Bee*, "these ever formidable and *hereditary* enemies of the white man" were central, and not peripheral, to the fair's over-arching vision of the "courage, manhood and sterling integrity" of American civilization.⁴⁵ Despite what may seem a blatant spatial division between icons of civilization and savagery in the fair's landscape, the *Bee*'s comment reminds us that these images were read in divergent ways and that imperial ideology was neither the cause nor effect of these representations.

On the micro-level, the Indian encampment offered spectators a more individualized experience.⁴⁶ Visitors could converse with Indians (primarily through interpreters), observe selected customary activities, or purchase their hand-made goods. Fair management bestowed "imperial eyes" (to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's term) on audiences, enacting a socially constructed visual relation of power between viewers and their object.⁴⁷ "Impertinent visitors have deliberately opened the doors to their tepees and even entered without invitations.... Yesterday a big sign had to be tacked up on the Pueblo House, 'Keep Out,'" explained the *World Herald*.⁴⁸ Despite the frustrations of some participants, many visitors felt they had license to this spectatorial prerogative because organizers had set up the encampment for their visual pleasure. Philip Deloria describes these encounters as the "backstage" of Indian performances on the fairgrounds.⁴⁹ For visitors the implication was that unlike watching staged battles or ceremonies, the camp offered glimpses of "real life" and opportunities for unscripted interaction. This made it particularly powerful in reinforcing, or perhaps challenging, audience perceptions of native life.

One fair visitor exploited the opportunity to experience "authentic" immersion. Fay Fuller, a young white female journalist, transgressed boundaries

of race, gender, and audience by assuming the identity of an Indian “chief” for a day, “dressed in buckskin and blankets and resplendent with war paint and trappings of gorgeous hue,” she wrote. After being “handled” by curious visitors, she admitted that she “resented the intrusion” of spectators “as do the red men themselves.” “How quickly even a civilized person adapts himself to existing conditions. At first I hesitated about mingling with these people, repulsed by the uncleanness of their surroundings. Before the afternoon wore away I felt quite at home, lying on their bedding, eating their food and *in reality* living their lives.”⁵⁰ Fuller’s belief in the “reality” of the encampment likely typified the perspective of most spectators. The marketing of the Indian Congress as ethnographic and “authentic” masked the constructed and performative nature of these representations.

Fuller’s imperial mentality is immediately evident, marked by her self-classification as a “civilized person” adopting a primitive identity, but her experience yielded unexpected results: “While it lasted I was at times almost unconscious that I was not one of the Indians, so near the surface flowed that current of barbaric blood which to this day permeates the veins of civilized man.”⁵¹ Fuller concluded that the “barbaric blood” of the Indian was not foreign to the life-blood of American civilization – that the “savage” lies within. In this way, Fuller’s observation contains the same nativist logic of anti-imperialist discourse, that is, the fear that colonizing savages could degenerate the white race. But her statement also reflected a more nostalgic and inclusive conception of Native Americans that took hold in American thought after Wounded Knee. Rather than differentiating the Indian as other, Fuller’s assessment fortified the placement of the Indian Congress within the boundaries of the fairgrounds and inside America’s past.

For some visitors, the encampment may have reinforced notions of the primitive and itinerant life of native societies, justifying U.S. subjugation. For others, observing typical family relationships may have confirmed mutual domestic values, concerns, and joys. In an unplanned event at the encampment, for example, a family of the Omaha tribe had a baby. The christening took place before the crowd, leading visitors to “shower” the new parents with presents. According to Nancy Shoemaker’s demographic analysis, Native American populations were increasing in this period, rather than “dying out,” as popular beliefs held.⁵² Still, the celebration of the birth using western religious and cultural practices perhaps symbolized the “death” of native traditions on another level. “The little Injun... displayed as many symptoms of future usefulness as does the average white baby at the same age,” wrote the *World Herald*.⁵³

As “living” exhibits, participants could affect their own representations through unplanned, individualized interactions with spectators, which in many cases confronted visitors with noteworthy contradictions.⁵⁴ Reporter W. A. Rogers of *Harper’s Weekly* wrote how struck he was by the disjuncture between the “savage belongings” of the Indians and the “new tin trunks” carrying them, which “seemed to strike the sense of humor of most of the visitors.”⁵⁵ It is revealing

that visitors responded to this perceived anomaly with laughter. Did it register for them a moment of surprise or discomfort that might have destabilized their perceptions or did it empower the very same categories that created those cultural expectations?⁵⁶ Perhaps both, but this unintended encounter certainly left an impression worthy of written comment. The *Omaha Bee* printed a similar observation by a fair employee:

One young Indian came one day to my space in the government building and asked to see a certain book of photographs in the Indian office exhibit. He looked through the book with interest and finally showed me a photograph of himself. It represented him as standing in front of a neat frame cottage, by the side of a two-horse plow, all his own. In the picture he was clothed in the orthodox civilized garb, but as he stood before me he wore a suit of fringed and beaded buckskin and an elaborate feather bonnet. I asked him which of the two was his usual costume and he replied that he had never worn paint and feathers before and he only did then "to show what it was like."⁵⁷

Here was an ideal example of an assimilated Indian who suspended his identity for the sake of show and understood his role as performer. As an Indian who did not live on a reservation and had in fact achieved the fruits of civilized life, his own farm and homestead, he held the potential to epitomize the process of acculturation. And yet, it was only through informal conversation that this "imperial" success story was shared.

Another visitor, Mary Alice Harriman, wrote of her unexpected encounters with the Apache Indians she met. Their "straight-cut hair" and "perfect teeth," coupled with their "pretty, good-natured" women, led her to rethink her conceptions of them; she wrote that these impressions "were hardly compatible with preconceived notions formed from the history of the Southwest, and the recollection of the atrocities committed by these same Apaches and their ancestors." Indian participant Sarah Whistler, of the Sauk tribe, also challenged Harriman's preconceptions, as well as those of fair photographer, Frank Rinehart, who described her as well educated, intelligent, and heroic. Rinehart's portrait captures her gentility and grace in expression and pose, as she majestically holds her shawl (See Figure 4). Harriman shared Rinehart's admiration for Whistler; she claimed to be "impressed" by her manner of a "princess," her "pure and grammatical English" and her facility with western literature.⁵⁸ In noting these incongruencies, these observations reveal the visitors' realization of the constructed nature of these depictions, which may have challenged spectators' to question if the "white man's burden" was warranted.⁵⁹

After 1898, world's fairs continued to employ many of the same conventions in depicting non-white subjects, but with an important difference. W. J. McGee's anthropology exhibit at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 in



Figure 4: Portrait of Sarah Whistler at the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1898. Copyrighted by official fair photographer, Frank A. Rinehart, but likely taken by his assistant, Adolph Muhr. (*From the collections of the Omaha Public Library, [tmi_02485]*).

St. Louis, for example, made a greater attempt to showcase the effects of the civilizing mission. McGee architected a “sequence of before-and-after encounters” to convey a narrative of assimilation. McGee worked with Samuel McCowan, superintendent of the Phoenix Indian School and organizer of the Omaha Indian encampment in 1898. Instead of isolating the Indian school exhibit, as was the case in Omaha, they built it adjacent to the village to accentuate educational efforts.⁶⁰ The Filipino Reservation in 1904, though most renown for spectacles

of Igorot natives, also showcased American efforts to uplift Filipinos by inviting the more “civilized” Visayans and military scouts.⁶¹ By 1904, the need to celebrate successful assimilation efforts was more consciously developed. This suggests that solidifying an imperial vision on the fairgrounds was a contingent and ongoing process that was not universally applied to fairs of this period.

America’s First Colonial Fair: The Greater America Exposition, 1899

The popularity of the Omaha fair, particularly the Indian Congress, inspired fair organizers to re-open it the following summer as the Greater America Exposition (GAE). Largely overlooked in histories of American imperialism, the GAE was America’s first (and only) exposition to feature its overseas empire, counterpoint to London’s Greater Britain Exhibition of 1899. Its very title encapsulated its imperial theme; the *Omaha Bee* explained, “The two words ‘Greater America’ mean that we propose to represent in the coming exposition all new acquisitions of territory we have made through the war with Spain and by annexation.”⁶² The cover of one of the GAE’s promotional pamphlets presents Uncle Sam embracing the globe and pointing to America’s newly acquired possessions (See Figure 5). Invoking the “white man’s burden,” the image establishes the purpose of the fair as America’s “first colonial exhibit.” Despite the transparency of the fair’s imperial purpose, the articulation of empire on the fairgrounds was problematic. The stickiness of reading the fair as a vehicle for imperial mobilization is evident in the political standpoint of its leading advertisers. Rosewater, editor of the *Omaha Bee* and head of fair publicity as well as Gilbert Hitchcock, editor of the *Omaha World-Herald*, both opposed formal colonial rule. “The *World-Herald* does not indorse the colonial policy,” argued one of its editorials and the *Bee* called acquisition “utterly fallacious and indefensible.”⁶³ Yet, Rosewater and Hitchcock’s views did not pose a contradiction to endorsing the GAE, suggesting that the GAE’s politics were tangential to the larger goal of attracting visitors and promoting regional economic development. In all likelihood, the idea of the GAE emerged from the synergy between print and other popular forms. GAE organizers centered the world’s fair on the subject occupying daily headlines; the “imperial” thematic was not necessarily vital to the enterprise.

Following headlines, fair organizers exploited interest overseas by celebrating the GAE’s opening with a parade of American volunteers returning from the Philippines. One year earlier, the Trans-Mississippi Exposition promoted national pride in America’s armed services preparing for combat with Spain with a number of elaborate parades. The GAE’s opening festivities, however, offered spectators a very different portrait of America at war; the *Chicago Times-Herald* explained:

The passing of these boys was greeted with many cheers and handclapping, yet there was something pathetic about their



Figure 5: Cover of a publicity pamphlet for the Greater America Exposition in Omaha, 1899. (From the personal collection of Jeffrey Spencer).

appearance. . . . They were the men who have been wounded in the engagements with the Filipinos, or who have been sent home after struggling with the enemy and fevers of the swamps and jungles of the islands. They were all in uniform, but their uniforms were tattered and torn and cut by the bullets of the treacherous natives whom they originally went abroad to assist, and who later on turned against them.⁶⁴

The GAE opened with the “pathetic” march of the wounded victims of American imperial warfare. Their torn uniforms, cut by bullets, undermined the image of a quick U.S. victory and introduced the possibility of escalating violence.

Nevertheless, GAE promoters attempted to suppress controversy in showcasing the making of an American empire. The corporation’s prospectus set out, “Omaha will be the first American city to exploit the wonders of the colonial possessions.”⁶⁵ GAE president George L. Miller told the crowds on opening day, “The characteristics of our new possessions can be more intelligently understood in these grounds than by a trip to the islands themselves.” The goal was to create “an ethnological exhibition,” claimed the *Springfield Republican*, “accurate and complete as possible in all respects, with the ‘circus’ element omitted.”⁶⁶

Yet, in comparison to the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, GAE organizers were even less concerned with ethnological study and focused on maximizing gate receipts. When the GAE re-opened the Indian Congress under the directorship of Colonel Frederick T. Cummins in 1899 (in smaller form), its anthropological framework crumbled. The Bureau of American Ethnology refused to support it, leading fair management to convert it into a private concession on the Midway. They chose not to make it a fair-sponsored ethnological exhibit because of the great expense, which had important implications in shaping the tenor of the exhibit. GAE management hired Samuel McCowan, who later organized the Indian school exhibit in St. Louis in 1904, to procure Indians from the Pine Ridge Sioux reservation to ensure successful sham battles.⁶⁷

Alongside the Indian encampment, the GAE offered multiple ethnographic villages on the Midway depicting America’s new colonial subjects. The Hawaiian village featured “real” hula dancing girls, poi-making and luaus in addition to displays of native handicrafts and agriculture. Organizers of the Cuban village placed beautiful Cuban women at its entrance to “flirt with the passerby.” Fair publicity further boasted of the performances of the Cuban “dancing girls” and urged spectators to see the large den of snakes.⁶⁸ The Cuban village’s main attraction was Valentine Ruiz, who served as “executioner” under the colonial regime of Spanish Governor-General Valeriano Weyler in Cuba a few years prior. Known as “the strangler,” Valentine allegedly put to death hundreds of political prisoners, which he re-enacted in daily mock executions at the fair. Audiences gawked at his cruelty; he was, to the *Omaha World-Herald*, an “inhuman monster, whose delight is the shedding of human blood.”⁶⁹ These colonial spectacles juxtaposed the erotic and grotesque to attract and repulse audiences.

The third of the “living exhibits” was the Filipino village. Special Commissioner to the Philippines, Henry F. Daily, transported fifty “lusty” Filipinos to Omaha along with a collection of artifacts along with materials to construct thatched huts for housing.⁷⁰ Fair planners constructed an artificial lake and palm tree garden to create a “tropical” landscape.⁷¹ Many Filipino participants, however, were unwilling to submit as objects of colonial amusement. The *Omaha World-Herald* described how “they began to shrink from the cold calculating stare of the ever curious visitors.”⁷² At the same time, the war in the Philippines cast a shadow on the village. According to the *World-Herald*, “When the Filipinos saw the First Nebraska marching into the street . . . they started to run for their lives, thinking the regiment had come to take them prisoners.”⁷³

The U.S. regime in the Philippines did not support the fair exhibit, further complicating the assembly of participants. Assistant Secretary of War Meiklejohn gave assurances that the U.S. colonial government would permit the transport of natives, but General Otis in the Philippines forbade exposition agents to gather any participants while he protested to the War Department. President McKinley ordered Otis to comply, and Meiklejohn finally arranged for their transportation.⁷⁴ To worsen matters, after arriving in San Francisco, immigration authorities denied them entrance unaware of the fair arrangements. Meiklejohn again resolved the crisis, assuring authorities that the War Department would take responsibility for their return.⁷⁵ These mishaps delayed the opening of the village for two months. The disinterest of the native participants coupled with the exhibit’s disorganization ultimately disappointed many fairgoers.

In the end, the colonial villages may not have convinced fairgoers that natives were in need of civilizing. Vision was a dual process on the fairgrounds; human subjects could not be easily controlled and unscripted exchanges inevitably transpired.⁷⁶ The *Omaha Bee* noted that on *Children’s Day*, many youngsters were eager to see the “queer” Cubans. After their encounter, the American children concluded that the Cubans were made of “flesh and blood, the same as those who reside in the states.” The *Bee* also reported the surprise of visitors at the “stylish” dress of the Filipino Visayans, with their “derby hats,” “canes,” and “coats and trousers . . . as white as snow.”⁷⁷ They did not fit the prototype of the exotic primitive.

Adjacent to the villages on the Midway was Edison’s Wargraph, displaying short war pictures from Cuba and the Philippines. The latest press coverage provided filmmakers with shooting scripts to meet the demands of audiences thirsty for war views.⁷⁸ But because the limitations of filmmaking largely precluded the shooting of battle footage, most war films were staged. In one popular film shown on the fairgrounds, spectators watched the pursuit of the Filipinos by the First Nebraska and Kansas regiments, groups of special interest to a primarily regional audience.⁷⁹ The camera perspective placed audiences in the action alongside the forces of American imperial warfare.⁸⁰ Many spectators were so moved that they watched the films several times.⁸¹ The novelty of cinema, the timeliness of its content, and patriotic spirit made Edison’s Wargraph one of

the fair's most popular attractions and perhaps its most effective instrument in galvanizing support for imperial actions.

Compared to the prior summer, the GAE's low attendance and poor investment returns for stockholders led many to call it a failure. The *Nebraska State Journal* wrote, "It has not only failed to attract patronage from the state, but the attendance from the city itself has been exceedingly light."⁸² Still, when considering the municipal improvements and tourism it brought to Omaha, the economic gains were wider in scope than subscription returns.⁸³ One of the GAE management's greatest mistakes was their decision not to solicit congressional funding, which reduced national news coverage and confined the fair to a more localized commercial operation.

But did the GAE's imperial focus and presentation also contribute to its failure? According to the *Nebraska State Journal*, "One of the directors admits that instead of a colonial exposition, with its educational features, it is a rotten, immoral midway."⁸⁴ A local writer agreed: "The only true good colonial exhibit is one from Hawaii. . . . Without this exhibit, the exposition could not deserve the name 'colonial.' Natives from Hawaii, the Philippines, Cuba and Porto Rico, are to be found only in shows along the midway."⁸⁵ The only profitable concessions were the giant see-saw, the old plantation, the scenic railway, the chutes, Hagenback's animal show, and Edison's Wargraph, attractions that had successfully drew audiences at other fairs of this period. The Cuban and Hawaiian villages lost money, and the heaviest loser on the grounds was the Philippine village.⁸⁶ The colonial villages may not have been lucrative, but they fostered an illusion of familiarity with foreign subjects for spectators and reinforced a worldview that cast them as novelty acts.

Nonetheless, the representational battles complicate the dominant historical interpretation of the fairgrounds as a coherent expression of American imperial dominion. Evolutionary anthropology in some ways served the interests of an imperial project, but its primary emphasis on pre-civilized native life came at the expense of celebrating the civilizing potential of "the white man's burden." Anthropologists created their own set of idealized depictions to demonstrate native diversity and capacity. Promoters borrowed the legitimating language of ethnography to proclaim its educational value, but the images that dominated accentuated Indian savagery. While it can be argued that these depictions justified pro-imperialists dismissal of self-rule, it was these same racialized images that anti-imperialists mobilized in wider public debates to underscore the threat of colonizing non-white subjects to Anglo-Saxon racial preservation and republican institutions.

At the same time, despite attempts to feature "aboriginal" Indians, fair management could not enforce conformity amongst participants. Fair visitor Alice French observed, "I looked from the swaying, painted warrior in the ring to the handsome young Indian in his smart tweed suit who was holding an umbrella attentively over two Indian maidens in civilized finery, and a voice at my elbow said, 'Say, Jim, why ain't you painted up like them, an' dancing?' to which came

Jim's scornful reply, 'I wasn't ever painted in my life, or danced, neither!'"⁸⁷ We cannot measure definitively, but we also cannot dismiss, the effect of these exchanges on the millions of fairgoers who passed through the fair gates.

Overall, the architects of the Indian Congress drew inspiration not from a narrative of imperial expansion, but from popular conventions of Indian iconography in circulation from previous world's fairs and popular culture. These representations not only failed to promote policies of detribalized land ownership, education, and assimilation, but they also accentuated the need and lust for violence to conquer resisting subjects. Ultimately, there was little entertainment value in portraying "evolved" Indians.

The conflicting images of the "Indian" at Omaha also reflected changing mainstream American views toward Native Americans in the 1890s. Even as popular culture celebrated narratives of bloody conquest, this period also witnessed a surge of nostalgia for pre-civilized Indian life. Shari Huhndorf notes this change in Frederick Jackson Turner's famous speech in 1893. Declaring the frontier closed, Turner characterized the Indian as the predecessor to the pioneer, refiguring the formulation of the Indian from the antithesis to civilization to a stage in social evolutionary development.⁸⁸ While the prospect of "going native" may have confirmed anti-imperialist fears, the drive to recover America's inner "Indianness" as a source of cultural restoration impeded the process of defining constructions of American national identity, race, and empire in opposition to Indian ways of life. The effect, if not the intention of muting this strand of representation, was to erase America's history of pacifying indigenous subjects in the popular culture surrounding the imperial debates, which may have heightened the impression of overseas colonization as a new departure for the nation and contributed to the traditional view of the Spanish-American War as a momentary fall into empire.

Notes

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